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## Writing Sample

Chris Chryssopoulos

Includes selections from the anthology *Fractured Planet*.

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Chris CHRISSOPOULOS

From the anthology *Fractured Planet* (Minoas Editions, Athens, 2004)

## COBALT BLUE

First things first

There's a sweet satisfaction in grief. A guilty pleasure that defies pain. There is a feeling of lust in great misfortune. Something dampens the realization of absence resulting from death. You see, when death comes without warning, reality resists logic, and looks artificial and somewhat fake. Death is a word for the living. A name for what is irrevocably lifeless.

At first, one feels kind of numb, because all there is, is death. Only later, when those that can be saved are spared, and those that have no life inside them are gone for good, only then, creeping from underneath the silence that covers the disturbed ground like a blanket, rises suspicion, and threat makes its first mark. Revenge is another terrorist act.

□□

Dust column.

Gravity was defied for the first time on that circular spot of ground. As if some momentary magnetic disturbance had sucked everything from the face of the earth. This was not a collapse, but ascension. And a gigantic tail, a column of white dust, was left behind it. Swirling slowly in its planetary rhythm, shining even in the middle of the night from the reflection of spotlights. The pit we saw was like a big apple-bite. And some days later they put two steles of blue light piercing the clouds. A beautiful fluorescent line up in the sky and on the face of the water.



The thin blue line

□□

“Where were you?”

This was the first question on everybody’s lips and it seemed to have psychographic qualities, because depending on what you answered, and the phrasing you chose, and the expression on your face, they were judging you and they were coming to conclusions.

I was in Francis’ place that morning, scheduled to fly to Athens via Newark later in the evening. We were on the top floor of the “Highlander”, the tallest building in Highland Park, New Jersey. Five stories high. The trees had never seemed greener to me along St. Adelaide. Everything was wet that Tuesday morning. The streets, the rectangular lawns, the red-bricked synagogues, the strip malls outside town, the telephone wires and the Garden State Parkway all the way to NY.

□□

10:30 a.m.

We were ready to set out for the airport. We sat on the couch following the old Russian farewell ritual, according to which travelers have to keep silent for a few minutes before starting their trip. I said my farewells to the fish in the North Plainfield Asian Food Market aquarium, to the poetry stack in the Pyramid second hand bookstore, to the Chipped Cup Cafe on Raritan Ave., but I hadn’t yet said my farewells to Francis when the phone rang. We looked at each other and we knew we could not break the silence.

The living room was absolutely quiet. The answering machine clicked. “Are you still there? Shit! Turn on the TV”.

□□

PBS

It’s the only channel we get. We don’t have cable and all the other stations are dead. The American city looks alive and colorful as if it has been conceived for the screen. In order to capture its mystery, we can’t turn to the world. We need to go the other way around; we have to trace the city inside the screen. The city is nothing but a genuine image violently and instantly communicated. Idols are indispensable in playing out the imaged American life. It is a system of luxurious preparation. Exquisite stereotypical compositions with only one passion: that which is seen - and the emergence of desire within it. Idols don’t make us dream, they are the dreams themselves. They produce powerful optical condensations. They are unmediated manifestations, instant recordings, and optical collages. They have nothing to do with imagination and fiction, instead, they are completely materialistic. Two wounded towers.

□□

LIVE

This is how things happened and our convictions were shaped. The first tower is already in flames. The crawl at the bottom of the screen refers to a “terrorist hit”. We break our Russian silence, but we have nothing to say. The second plane enters the skyscraper with an elegant turn. The first tower collapses. Francis runs to the phone. The lines are busy. We rush to our balcony over Highland Park and we look around in amazement as if something could be sensed in the air. My mobile phone is out. We are only half an hour’s drive from New York, and yet the sky is peaceful and clear. We manage to get online. Most pages are sluggishly slow, but it seems that our email is working.

□□

Day one

From: Rasha

To: Chris

Subject: shit...

Chris, is this confirmed? Glad you are safe on the ground. I knew/know Jed, he was/is good friends with Darryl. He is reported as having been a passenger in one of the flights... Please let me know if you hear anything.

From: Chris

To: Rasha

Subject: What I know

Iggy saw Jed’s name in the news. Not confirmed that he boarded.

□□

9/1/1939

I’m tired of seeing the collapse footage on PBS. It is two days now that we have nowhere to go. The bridges and tunnels are still closed. The air-path for Newark passes over Highland Park. Air force jets make frequent low passes in sub-sonic speeds. Francis has not heard from the university. It is impossible to reach Virgin Atlantic. We make long walks every evening. The weather is warm and painfully beautiful. Sabbath candles are lit in everyone’s window. I’m pleurably hungry. We sit outside and order kosher pizza. A student comes by and leaves a yellow piece of paper on our table. Francis says its W. H. Auden.

September 1, 1939

I sit in one of the dives

*On Fifty-second Street**Uncertain and afraid*

As the clever hopes expire

*Of a low dishonest decade:**Waves of anger and fear**Circulate over the bright**And darkened lands of the earth,**Obsessing our private lives;**The unmentionable odor of death*

*Offend the September night.*

□ □

Day three

From: Chris

To: Darryl

Subject: Jed

Darryl, do you know if this is true?

I pray it isn't...

Chris

From: Darryl

To: Chris

Subject: RE: Jed

Chris,

This is a different Jed, but Jed's father was on the 64<sup>th</sup> floor of building 1 when the first plane hit it. He called home at 9:00 am to say that a plane had hit and we haven't heard from him since. Jed's taking it kinda hard, so please keep him in mind.

One.

From: Chris

To: Jed

Subject: Good and bad

Jed,

I was so glad when I found out that it was a different Jed G. on the passenger list of one of the hijacked planes. However, I heard from Darryl that you may not have been able to hear from your father yet. Just wanted to tell you that my thoughts are with you.

One.

Chris.

□ □

BBQ

The psychiatrist Peter Mansfield invited us for supper. I avoid talking about all the horror stories and the hysterical rumors that float around us. Peter is uneasy because he can't reach his patients. The army has come down with humvies in Atlantic Avenue. I'm trying to make a joke saying that, in Greece, the worst things would happen in the super market isles. Peter comes out carrying his laptop. It's such a sweet night! He shows us an email from one of his patients.

Subject: FW: BE CAREFUL!!!!

Don't know how much is factual, but better safe than sorry.

THIS WAS SENT TO ME...THOUGHT YOU GUYS MIGHT WANTED TO READ....

Subject: FW: BE CAREFUL!!!!

Hi all,

This e-mail was just sent to me by a good friend of mine in Lumberton. Please be in prayer for our country, we are truly in a spiritual warfare...

-----Original Message-----

A COWORKER OF MINE TOLD US THAT HER STEPMOM WAS AT THE GROCERY STORE IN LINE BEHIND AN ARAB MAN. HE WAS SHORT \$.75 ON HIS GROCERY SO THE STEPMOM GAVE HIM THE MONEY. HE REPLIED WHY DID YOU GIVE ME THIS ALL AMERICANS ARE PIGS.

ANYWAY SHE JUST IGNORED THE COMMENT BUT WHEN SHE LEFT OUT OF THE GROCERY STORE HE WAS WAITING FOR HER IN THE PARKING LOT. HE CAME UP TO HER AND AGAIN ASKED HER WHY DID SHE GIVE HIM THE MONEY. SHE STATED THAT SHE WOULD HAVE DONE IT FOR ANYONE. HE REPLIED I CANNOT REPAY YOU BUT I WILL TELL YOU THIS DO NOT DRINK ANY COCA COLA PRODUCTS AFTER JULY 3RD. THIS IS VERY SCARY SO PLEASE BE VERY CAREFUL. AFTER 9/11 WE CAN'T TAKE ANYTHING FOR GRANTED.

SHELIA

□□

Birdman

People jumping in the void, this is a truly heart-breaking picture. It is not the overwhelming conclusion that gives me a sense of shiver, but the flying body itself. I'm hungry for images of falling persons on TV. Death as such has very little relevance. I try, for Francis' sake, to show sympathy but the truth is that - without trace of rancor or other sentimental entanglement - I watch everything around me with sang-froid and curiosity. I try to support Francis with an affectation of interest and with crude rationalizations. She has friends among the victims. I would want to feel in me the emotion of a grieving person or someone who is tortured by distress - anger is understandable. I play the "Thin Red Line" video seeking an explanation, or rather a description, of fear

TRAIN: This great evil--where's it come from? How'd it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who's doing this? Who's killing us, robbing us of life and light, mocking us with the sight of what we mighta known? Does our ruin benefit the earth, aid the grass to grow and the sun to shine? Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this night?"

WITT: One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. That death's got the final word, it's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory, feels something smiling through it.

□□

Day four

From: Jed  
To: Chris  
Subject: RE: Good and bad  
Chris

Thanks, you know I value all the support I've gotten the most from my peeps. My dad is not making it... We don't have a body yet and needless to say it's been a nightmare. My mom has been through hell and its not ending any time soon. You guys have held me down and helped me when the media has only made me sick, pimping my father's death to rationalize the impending slaughter. The only thing that has been keeping me up and treading water for my mom is folk like you. Thanks Chris for having my back. See you soon kid.

Jed  
From: Chris  
To: Jed  
Subject: Stay up  
Glad to hear you're maintaining through all this. I know all this talk of war isn't helping.

Francis returned from work. Her foreign students are going crazy. I spent all morning trying to reach Virgin Atlantic.

□□

Across the river

Tonight, after we returned home, I wrote in Greek.

*Άνοιξαν οι σήραγγες και πήραμε το τρένο για τη Νέα Υόρκη. Ο Penn Station είναι γεμάτος αστυνομικούς. Φοβήθηκα ότι θα με ψάξουν. Πρώτη φορά πήρα μαζί μου το διαβατήριό. Καθώς περπατάμε την 5<sup>η</sup> λεωφόρο προς το SoHo, με πολιορκεί η εντύπωση ότι είμαι διάφανος. Είμαι ξένος. Είμαι από αλλού. Η Φράνσις φωτογραφίζει διαρκώς δεξιά κι αριστερά χωρίς να μου μιλά. Προσπαθώ να αντισταθώ στο αίσθημα της ετερότητας, που ίσως να είναι απλώς μια μορφή φόβου. Όσες φορές βρέθηκα εδώ, κάθε φορά αισθανόμουν ότι ανήκω απόλυτα και δικαιωματικά εδώ ακριβώς. Πεισματώνω και σκέφτομαι ότι δεν θα παραχωρήσω αυτό το δικαίωμα στον αδιευκρίνιστο φόβο και στις αστερόεσσες που κυματίζουν έξαφνα παντού, με εφιαλτικό λίκνισμα. Στο βάθος του δρόμου υψώνεται εκείνο το τεράστιο νέφος σκόνης. Πίσω του κρύβεται ένας θριαμβευτικός ήλιος.*

Francis wanted to know what I was writing. I run the text through the automatic translator and this is what came out:

*Opened the tunnels and took the train for New York. The Penn Station is full police officers. First time I took with me my passport. As we walk the 5th avenue to the SoHo, besieges me the impression that I am transparent. I am foreigner. I am from elsewhere. Francis is taking pictures left right without speaking to me. I try to resist in the feeling of otherness, that possibly is simply a form of fear. All times I found myself here, each time I felt that I belong absolutely and rightfully here precisely. Stubbornly I think that I will not leave this my right because of the fear and the Old Glories waving everywhere in nightmare. From the depth of street raises that enormous cloud of dust. Behind is hidden a glorious sun.*

A huge crowd of ambulances and paramedics gathers around St. Vincent's. Street poles, hydrants, postal boxes, tree trunks, everything is dappled with handwritten notes, computer printouts and photographs of various sizes. I look at the faces of the missing. Many beautiful women. I think I could have flirted with some from them if they hadn't perished in the ruins of ground zero.

From: Jed

To: Chris

Subject: RE: stay up

To say the least.

I'm at home with my family in a premature house of mourning, listening to the pundits on TV about the CIA and this mess w/ bin Laden. Its them who really killed my father. Im sick with all this cop love going around.

From: Chris

To: Jed

Subject RE: RE: stay up

Things are getting crazy, have you heard the stats on gun sales?

From: Jed

To: Chris

Subject: BigBro

Do you think we should be more careful with our mails, esp. in a time like this?

Manhattan is littered with sloppily photocopied sheets of paper. Only one word and a huge, scarring nightmarish, threatening question mark underneath. "Libya?", "Yemen?", "Iraq?", "Pakistan?", "Syria?". No one seems to know who is responsible for this. Next morning they were all gone. There is an ambiguous feeling of community in the air.

□□

Day six

City authorities are preparing for sporadic bursts of rage and irrational violence. Collectivity breeds the worst kind of paranoia. A pamphlet with psychological guidelines was handed on the streets.

Take care of yourself!

Don't H – A – L – T

Do not get too H-ungry. Do not stay A-ngry, L-onely and T-ired. Eat right, get enough rest and share your thoughts and feelings with people around you. Feel less alone. If you need to talk NOW and no one is available, call 1-800-LIFENET 24hrs.

Feel Free to Feel Better!

□□



9/24/2001

From: Chris  
To: Jed  
Subject: NONE

Jed,

How are you kid? Darryl mentioned you had a memorial service for your father last week. Again my deepest condolences. Sorry I could not come. All your emails have definitely been an inspiration to me. Be strong. Im flying late today.  
Stay up.

Late at night we managed to sneak close to the Canal Street barricades. Oh, that light-emitting cloud was mesmerizing us with its cobalt blue electric hue! Sirens were ejecting red and orange beams all around us. It was magnificent. I remember that image like a living Jackson Pollock canvas. Pulsing, with its horrible, newly born, new order life.

Postscript

It might have been on that same day that Amiri Baraka wrote *Somebody blew up America*.

(All thinking people  
oppose terrorism  
both domestic  
& international...  
But one should not  
be used  
To cover the other)

*They say its some terrorist, some  
barbaric  
A Rab, in  
Afghanistan  
It wasn't our American terrorists  
It wasn't the Klan or the Skin heads  
Or the them that blows up nigger  
Churches, or reincarnates us on Death Row  
It wasn't Trent Lott  
Or David Duke or Giuliani  
Or Schundler, Helms retiring  
It wasn't  
the gonorrhea in costume  
the white sheet diseases  
That have murdered black people  
Terrorized reason and sanity  
Most of humanity, as they pleases  
They say (who say? Who do the saying  
Who is them paying  
Who tell the lies*

*Who in disguise*  
*Who had the slaves*  
*Who got the bux out the Bucks*  
*Who got fat from plantations*  
*Who genocided Indians*  
*Tried to waste the Black nation*  
*Who live on Wall Street*  
     *The first plantation*  
*Who cut your nuts off*  
*Who rape your ma*  
*Who lynched your pa*  
*Who got the tar, who got the feathers*  
*Who had the match, who set the fires*  
*Who killed and hired*  
*Who say they God & still be the Devil*  
*Who the biggest only*  
*Who the most goodest*  
*Who do Jesus resemble*  
*Who created everything*  
*Who the smartest*  
*Who the greatest*  
*Who the richest*  
*Who say you ugly and they the goodlookingest*  
*Who define art*  
*Who define science*  
*Who made the bombs*  
*Who made the guns*  
*Who bought the slaves, who sold them*  
*Who called you them names*  
*Who say Dahmer wasn't insane*

*Who Who Who*  
*Who stole Puerto Rico*  
*Who stole the Indies, the Philipines, Manhattan*  
     *Australia & The Hebrides*  
*Who forced opium on the Chinese*  
*Who own them buildings*  
*Who got the money*  
*Who think you funny*  
*Who locked you up*  
*Who own the papers*  
*Who owned the slave ship*  
*Who run the army*  
*Who the fake president*  
*Who the ruler*  
*Who the banker*

*Who Who Who*  
*Who own the mine*  
*Who twist your mind*  
*Who got bread*

*Who need peace  
Who you think need war  
Who own the oil  
Who do no toil  
Who own the soil  
Who is not a nigger  
Who is so great ain't nobody bigger  
Who own this city  
Who own the air  
Who own the water  
Who own your crib  
Who rob and steal and cheat and murder  
and make lies the truth  
Who call you uncount  
Who live in the biggest house  
Who do the biggest crime  
Who go on vacation anytime  
Who killed the most niggers  
Who killed the most Jews  
Who killed the most Italians  
Who killed the most Irish  
Who killed the most Africans  
Who killed the most Japanese  
Who killed the most Latinos  
Who/Who/Who  
Who own the ocean  
Who own the airplanes  
Who own the malls  
Who own television  
Who own radio  
Who own what ain't even known to be owned  
Who own the owners that ain't the real owners  
Who own the suburbs  
Who suck the cities  
Who make the laws  
Who made Bush president  
Who believe the confederate flag need to be flying  
Who talk about democracy and be lying  
WHO WHO WHOWHO  
Who the Beast in Revelations  
Who 666  
Who decide  
Jesus get crucified  
Who the Devil on the real side  
Who got rich from Armenian genocide  
Who the biggest terrorist  
Who change the bible  
Who killed the most people  
Who do the most evil  
Who don't worry about survival*

Who have the colonies  
 Who stole the most land  
 Who rule the world  
 Who say they good but only do evil  
 Who the biggest executioner  
     Who/Who/Who  
 Who own the oil  
 Who want more oil  
 Who told you what you think that later you find out a lie  
 Who Who ???  
 Who fount Bin Laden, maybe they Satan  
 Who pay the CIA,  
 Who knew the bomb was gonna blow  
 Who know why the terrorists  
     Learned to fly in Florida, San Diego  
 Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion  
     And cracking they sides at the notion  
 Who need fossil fuel when the sun ain't goin' nowhere  
 Who make the credit cards  
 Who get the biggest tax cut  
 Who walked out of the Conference  
     Against Racism  
 Who killed Malcolm, Kennedy & his Brother  
 Who killed Dr King, Who would want such a thing?  
     Are they linked to the murder of Lincoln?  
 Who invaded Grenada  
 Who made money from apartheid  
 Who keep the Irish a colony  
 Who overthrow Chile and Nicaragua later  
 Who killed David Sibeko, Chris Hani,  
     the same ones who killed Biko, Cabral,  
     Neruda, Allende, Che Guevara, Sandino,  
 Who killed Kabila, the ones who wasted Lumumba, Mondlane , Betty Shabazz, Princess Margaret,  
 Ralph Featherstone, Little Bobby  
 Who locked up Mandela, Dhoruba, Geronimo,  
 Assata, Mumia, Garvey, Dashiell Hammett, Alphaeus Hutton  
 Who killed Huey Newton, Fred Hampton,  
     Medgar Evers, Mikey Smith, Walter Rodney,  
 Was it the ones who tried to poison Fidel  
 Who tried to keep the Vietnamese Oppressed  
 Who put a price on Lenin's head  
 Who put the Jews in ovens,  
     and who helped them do it  
 Who said "America First"  
     and ok'd the yellow stars

WHO WHO

Who killed Rosa Luxembourg, Liebnick  
 Who murdered the Rosenbergs  
     And all the good people iced,  
     tortured, assassinated, vanished

*Who got rich from Algeria, Libya, Haiti,  
 Iran, Iraq, Saudi, Kuwait, Lebanon,  
 Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine,  
 Who cut off peoples hands in the Congo  
 Who invented Aids Who put the germs  
 In the Indians' blankets  
 Who thought up "The Trail of Tears"  
 Who blew up the Maine  
 & started the Spanish American War  
 Who got Sharon back in Power  
 Who backed Batista, Hitler, Bilbo,  
 Chiang kai Chek                      who WHO    W H O  
 Who decided Affirmative Action had to go  
 Reconstruction, The New Deal, The New  
 Frontier, The Great Society,  
 Who do Tom Ass Clarence Work for  
 Who doo doo come out the Colon's mouth  
 Who know what kind of Skeeza is a Condoleezza  
 Who pay Connelly to be a wooden negro  
 Who give Genius Awards to Homo Locus  
 Subsistere  
 Who overthrew Nkrumah, Bishop,  
 Who poison Robeson,  
     who try to put DuBois in Jail  
 Who frame Rap Jamil al Amin, Who frame the Rosenbergs, Garvey,  
     The Scottsboro Boys,      The Hollywood Ten*

*Who set the Reichstag Fire  
 Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed  
 Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers  
 To stay home that day  
 Why did Sharon stay away ?*

*Who, Who, Who  
                          explosion of Owl the newspaper say  
 the devil face cd be seen      Who   WHO   Who WHO  
 Who make money from war  
 Who make dough from fear and lies  
 Who want the world like it is  
 Who want the world to be ruled by imperialism and national oppression and terror  
     violence, and hunger and poverty.  
 Who is the ruler of Hell?  
 Who is the most powerful*

*Who you know ever  
 Seen God?  
 But everybody seen  
 The Devil*

*Like an Owl exploding  
 In your life in your brain in your self*

*Like an Owl who know the devil  
All night, all day if you listen, Like an Owl  
Exploding in fire. We hear the questions rise  
In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog  
Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell  
Who and Who and WHO who who  
Whoooo and Whoooooooooooooooooooooo!*

Even he, could not escape the frightening circle of innuendoes.

END

*Translated from Greek by the author*